

THE PREPARATION

HEBREWS 12.1

This is the second Sunday of our “**Focus on Life**” campaign – part of our 2010 theme of “**Focus Forward**” keeping our eye on the goal of impacting our community for Christ.

Some time back we set as a goal to touch every door within a **1.5 mile radius** of DaySpring Church. Yesterday, several members took participated in our first outreach activity designed to complete that goal.

We will continue with the project this afternoon from 530 – 730, and then again next Saturday from 930 – 1200. I want to really encourage you to take an active part in the project.

According to my unofficial guestimate, there may be as many as 1500 families within that 1.5 mile radius. If each family has four members, that’s around **6000 individuals**. Somewhere in that number, there are certainly some lost people who need to hear the Gospel message.

Last week, I preached on the subject of “**The Pursuit**” from **Philippians 3.13-14**, the scripture reference that is the theme for our year’s theme of “Focus Forward.”

Paul said that he had put everything behind him and kept his eye trained on the mark of the prize of becoming like Christ. All of his accomplishments – both successes and failures – are nothing when compared to the joy of knowing Christ.

Today, we want to consider the subject of “**The Preparation**” as we look at our text in **Hebrews 12.1**.

Most of us are familiar with **Hebrews 11** – the faith chapter – where the author of Hebrews reviews the people of the Old Testament who experienced the life of faith – resting on the promise of the Messiah – a promise that they never got to see fulfilled, although they knew one day it would be.

Chapter 12 is actually a continuation of the theme of Chapter 11.

That is the reason for the word “therefore” at the beginning of the verse.

I. Encouragement

Heb. 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...

The word “cloud” is synonymous in this verse with the word “crowd.” This is a direct reference back to those recognized in Chapter 11.

Many refer to the people listed in Chapter 11 as heroes of the faith. And it’s ok to refer to them that way. But we must remember that if they are heroes, it is not because they were extraordinary people.

They were ordinary people from all walks of life who surrendered themselves to faith in God and as a result were able to accomplish extraordinary things through the power of God working in their lives.

Here once again we see the sports metaphor or analogy used to help us to understand what the author of Hebrews is trying to teach us. The use of the sports metaphor is one reason most Bible scholars believe the Apostle Paul wrote this book.

The setting is similar to that of the Olympic Games. The event is part of the track and field events – as we will see, it is not a sprint, but a long-distance race – a marathon.

One picture that some commentators like to draw in the verse is a scene inside of a stadium or coliseum with row upon row of spectators cheering on the runners. They teach that the great “cloud of witnesses” mentioned in verse 1 is made up of those listed in Chapter 11 – that they are spectators watching us as we run in the race and encouraging us to persevere and to run with patience.

Yet I think that the image is much different than that.

This “cloud of witnesses” does refer to those listed in Chapter 11, but not as spectators. They are witnesses.

A witness can be one who watches and listens so that they may report on an activity, or a witness can be someone who has already seen and heard and experienced such things that they cannot keep silent about.

I believe the scene is not in the stadium, but in the locker room or in the gymnasium before those participating in the marathon go out to take their places.

The reason we read Chapter 11 is to learn what it means to walk by faith by the example of those who have done it.

These are our coaches – those who have themselves run in the same race and who can advise us on how to pace ourselves – how to stay refreshed by taking in plenty of water – in this case, living water that comes from only one source – spending time with Jesus.

We are surrounded by witnesses of the truth of God's word, and they may all be dead, but they still speak – not audibly, but accurately through the infallible word of God.

Heb. 11:4 *By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks.*

I mentioned that this race is more of a marathon than a sprint, but it might even more accurately be referred to as a relay. A relay is run by a team of runners. Each runner runs his leg of the race to the best of his ability, then passes the baton to the runner of the next leg.

Each team member is dependent on the others on the team to win the race. No matter how well the person on the first leg runs, he is dependent on the person running the last leg to win.

Those that are listed in Chapter 11 lived with a promise always before them, but they never got to see the promise fulfilled – in other words, the race was not finished. They ran their leg of the race, then passed the baton on to each succeeding generation.

Heb. 11:39 *And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, 40 since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.*

So we are surrounded by our coaches. We have the testimony of those who have gone before us to guide us in our own efforts for carrying out the great commission of Jesus Christ.

One of the things a great coach will remind his athletes about is that they must lighten their load – they must rid themselves of anything that might get in the way of running the best race of his life. A good coach would talk about clothing and conditioning in preparation for the race.

Heb. 12:1 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, (NAS) let us also lay aside every encumbrance (NIV – everything that hinders) and the sin which so easily entangles us...*

II. Encumbrances (Hindrances)

An encumbrance is anything that hinders – anything that keeps us from running our best or that keeps us from running period.

The KJV refers to weight.

The most efficient runners are those who wear the correct clothing – clothing that will allow the runner to slip through the air with the least amount of drag – shoes that are durable yet as light as possible.

Luke 21:34 *Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.*

Overindulgence and excessive worry about the affairs of life are two great hindrances to the Christian walk.

Our first inclination, when we think of hindrances, is to think of bad things. but this reference is not just about sin – about

hindrances that are bad things. The author deals with sin on its own in just a moment.

But what exactly is a hindrance? It is anything that keeps you from carrying out the call of God on your life. And it is important to note that hindrances do not have to be bad things in and of themselves.

In fact, a hindrance may be a good thing that we allow to take the place of the best thing.

The good athlete does not choose between good things and bad things, but good things and the best things.

He doesn't want a good pair of shoes, but the best pair of shoes money can buy – or at least the best that he can afford.

He doesn't just eat any food – but the kind of food that grows muscle and helps to increase endurance.

When we settle for good when the best thing is readily available to us, then that good thing becomes a bad thing – a hindrance.

2 Tim. 2:4 *No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier. 5 Also if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not win the prize unless he competes according to the rules.*

A hindrance may be something that is otherwise a legitimate life pursuit. I could make you a list, but things that might not hinder one person can be a hindrance to another.

The only way you can truly know what things are hindrances for you is to start running. Whatever keeps you off the track is, for you, a hindrance.

You cannot determine a hindrance until you are in the race.

A.W. Pink: A bag of gold would be as great a handicap to a runner as a bag of lead.

One of the problems we have with hindrances is that we always seem to think in terms of what we have to give up to run in the race instead of the prize to be won by the sacrifice.

Jesus said that whatever we give up we will get back in “**good measure, pressed down, and running over.**”

Not only are we kept from doing our best for Christ by the hindrances of life, but also by the...

III. Entanglements (Sin)

Sin has one goal – death. Where there is sin, there is death. It may not be physical death, but it may be death of a relationship or the death of our confidence in our own abilities to perform.

For the runner, he does not need anything that is going to get wrapped around his legs and feet and cause him to trip or keeps him from running with the greatest efficiency.

Different translations of this verse help us to understand what the author of Hebrews was trying to say about sin being an entanglement.

- Clings to and entangles
- Persistently surrounds us
- Just won't let go
- Holds on to us so tightly
- Hinders our progress
- Dogs our feet wraps around our feet and causes us to trip

Psalm 38:4 *My iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.*

The writer of Hebrews seems to be referring to a particular sin since he uses the definite article “the” sin. In light of the emphasis on faith, many commentators believe that the sin he is talking about here is the sin of unbelief.

A runner that does not believe he can win the race is defeated before he ever steps on the track.

We say we have faith that God can and will do anything to see that we are cared for and provided for. But when it comes time to put that faith to the test, we generally will not act on that faith. Therefore, it is a dead faith and is good for nothing – in fact, it is not faith at all. It is simply religion.

Ensnared by Sausages! - The St. Petersburg Times once carried a news item about a hungry thief who grabbed some sausages in a meat market, only to find they were part of a string fifteen feet long.

He was hindered in his getaway as the sausage wrapped around his feet and caused him to trip and fall. The police found him collapsed in a tangle of fresh sausages.

So it is with sin: we always come away with more of it than we expected, and it tends to entangle us until it brings us down.

We are encouraged by this great cloud of witnesses who have run before us to rid ourselves of all encumbrances and of sin that entangles so that we can...

Heb. 12:1 ...run with patient endurance and steady and active persistence the appointed course of the race that is set before us...

IV. Endurance

Patient endurance and persistence – those two things say to me that the race that we are expected to run – in fact, the race that you are already in if you claim Christ as Lord – is not going to be an easy win.

It is going to require sacrifice and a “never quit – never make excuses” kind of attitude.

Anyone can come with a reason for failure, but is difficult to find an excuse for not trying.

The phrase “let us run” is not a suggestion, but an imperative – a commandment.

As Christians, we are given very specific orders: Don’t stand still or meander, or wander around, or stroll through life. The command is a very clear and emphatic RUN!!

We are not to allow ourselves to be carried along by the stream or to be hindered by life. When we use life as an excuse for being involved in the work of the church, it says that we have separated our spiritual life from the secular life – that life that we were supposed to have died to at salvation.

Matt. 11:29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me... 30 My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

That may sound like a contradiction when I say the race is hard and Jesus says it’s easy. But listen to what He said.

When you are wearing His yoke, the burden is light. What makes it heavy is when we turn away from the walk of faith and try to do everything in our own power.

Simply because the burden is light does not mean that the race is not going to be difficult. In fact, the word used for race here is the source of our word “agony.”

But let me remind you that we are not to compare the frustrations, difficulties, and adversities that may come with ministry to the rewards that await us as we grow in Christ. There is no comparison.

Romans 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

Finally, notice that we are to run the race “that is set before us.”

The idea is that of a lane. A runner must stay in his lane if he is going to run according to the rules. God calls us personally – by name – not only to salvation, but also to service.

He calls us to run with patience and persistence the race that He has set before us.